

# A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Sandra Hagen



*Western yellow jacket*

## DANCING WITH WASPS

A wasp zipping around too close at a campground or during a picnic will land anyone an audition for the cast of *Riverdance*. Most likely, this uninvited guest to your outdoor gathering is the Western yellow jacket.

The Western yellow jacket is one of several species of wasps in North Dakota. They come in black and yellow, your standard wasp colors. Western yellow jackets may grow up to one inch long; have a distinct “waist,” yellow ring around the eyes, and very few hairs. Bees, in contrast, are not as boldly colored, stockier, and are covered with hairs.

Yellow jackets are beneficial, feeding on caterpillars, grasshoppers and other insects that wreak havoc on gardens or crops. However, they are also scavengers, pursuing sugary substances and garbage. That’s why the sweet lemonade you drink sitting on the porch, the fish cleaning station by the lake, and apples on the ground or even in trees, attract yellow jackets. This scavenging tactic allows yellow jackets to survive long after other insects have vanished.

Eventually, all yellow jackets, except the fertilized queens, die in late fall. The females spend North Dakota winters underground, in logs, or some other dwelling out of the elements. Come spring, the lone queen searches for an ideal nest site, such as an abandoned rodent hole. Human company doesn’t bother her, either, as she sometimes picks cracks in walls, under porches or stairs as her nesting site.

The first batch of eggs the queen lays is the worker yellow jackets. The eggs hatch as larvae, are fed until they pupate, and emerge as adults three weeks later. Adult workers start chewing wood, leaves, and other paper products to make a paste to form the characteristic paper globular nests.

The colony continues to grow with the queen repeatedly laying eggs and workers continually renovating the nest to basketball size. Between home improvements, workers may travel 1,000 feet or more to prey on insects to be fed to the next batch of worker larvae. By summer’s end, the colony may consist of 5,000 workers or more, making them more noticeable to humans.

Particularly during hot and dry weather, population outbreaks can occur. In late summer the queen produces female eggs to follow in her tiny footsteps.

Yellow jackets will sting if disturbed. The best thing to do is leave the *Riverdance* audition to the professionals. Just sit quietly and enjoy the show.

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**SANDRA HAGEN** is a Game and Fish Department nongame biologist.